



Rule changes will improve Senate procedures
BY THE TH EDITORIAL BOARD
Wednesday, February 2, 2011

Iowa's senators are trying to make the Senate system more transparent and efficient.

Both of Iowa's long-serving senators last week did their part in attempting to reform the rules of the U.S. Senate. For Chuck Grassley, his goal was achieved. Tom Harkin didn't get the same satisfaction.

For more than a decade, Grassley has been railing against "secret holds." By this procedure, a single senator may put the brakes on legislation or a nomination. And the senator placing the hold doesn't even have to say why. His or her reason doesn't even have to be relevant to the measure itself. In many cases, senators don't even know which colleague placed the item on hold -- hence the secret.

Grassley has been proposing amendments to get the practice stopped since 1997. Last week, he finally got one of them approved. On a 92-4 vote, the Senate passed a binding resolution that requires senators to make their objections in writing and to have the objections printed in The Congressional Record two days after they are made, whether or not the bills or nominations have been brought up for floor consideration. That will increase transparency and bring greater accountability.

It's about time. For years, the secret

hold has bottled up bills and nominations and has generally slowed the work of the Senate. With Grassley's tenacity, the secret hold rule is finally changed.

Harkin's similar quest to curtail the delaying power of the filibuster was not so successful.

Harkin led the charge to change the rule used to stall action on bills or nominations, which requires 60 votes to override in the 100-member body. Harkin's proposal would have gradually reduced the 60-vote threshold to a simple majority of 51 as debate proceeded. Other measures would have gotten rid of filibusters that specifically stop bills from being brought to the Senate floor, and restored the requirement that senators imposing a filibuster must stay on the floor debating the issue.

Though the measures failed, Harkin's attempt to rein in the filibuster is laudable. In 2009, for the first time ever, the Senate notched the dubious achievement of having more than 100 filibusters and acts of procedural obstruction in less than one year.

Another measure that did pass gets three cheers for breaking up the logjam of confirmations of presidential appointments -- such as former Dubuque County Sheriff Ken Runde's year-and-a-half wait for his confirmation as a U.S. marshal. The proposal cuts by one-third the number of appointees that will require Senate approval. That's a sensible move. When U.S. marshal appointments are lingering for more than a year, it's obvious the Senate is just bogged down.

For years, the Senate has been hamstrung by its own rules and procedures. As a result, legislation gets stuck there. The changes made last week were a good start. No doubt Harkin and Grassley will continue to seek ways to keep legislation moving in the U.S. Senate.

Editorials reflect the consensus of the Telegraph Herald Editorial Board.